



Hillary still a big chance

US President George Bush won't call the Democratic Party by its full name. He shortens it to the Democrat Party because he doesn't think they are any more democratic than the Republicans.

The dubious democratic processes of the Democrats will have a marked bearing on who will finally be the party's nominee.

Barack Obama leads Hillary Clinton in delegates selected in state-level primaries and caucuses. But the race is far from over. Obama's pledged delegate count is only just over half the 2025 delegates it will take to win the nomination at the Democratic National Convention in late August.

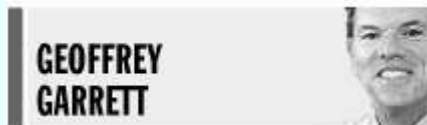
Clinton is pointing to the big state primaries in Ohio, Texas and Pennsylvania as her firewall against Obama's momentum.

Even if Obama does better than expected in the state contests, he will not accumulate enough delegates to secure the nomination before the party convention.

The Democrats use a form of decentralised proportional representation.

Small numbers of delegates are selected in what are essentially mini-primaries and caucuses at the level of congressional districts within states.

The result is that clear "wins" at the state level invariably belie much closer delegate counts.



The only way Obama could wrap up the nomination before the convention would be to convince Clinton and her supporters to throw in the towel. Despite her recent financial troubles, no one expects Clinton to give in even if her campaign does not regain momentum.

Obama has won all the states where the Democrats have selected delegates using caucuses, relying on small bands of motivated Obama activists to outnumber even smaller gatherings of Clinton faithful.

Primaries are open to all registered Democrats and often to independent voters as well. Clinton has also won the biggest states, notably California and New York.

The numbers of participants paint a dramatic picture of the differences between big state primaries and small state caucuses. Clinton gained more than three million votes in California and New York alone.

In so doing, she gained the support of 10 times as many people as all those who have caucused for Obama in those states using that method of delegate selection.

But it is delegates seated at the national convention, not states won nor votes received, that will determine the Democrat nominee for president. The delegate race is not only too close to call. It is also shrouded in uncertainty.

But Clinton's best chance to win the nomination is to win most of the 800 super delegates, fully one-fifth of all those who will vote at the national convention. Critically, they are not bound by the results of any state primary or caucus.

In straw polls of super delegates, Clinton currently has the support of close to two-thirds of them.

Alternatively, the party grandees could support Obama as the most electable candidate against the Republican John McCain. Or they could choose to throw their weight behind the candidate with the most regular delegates, the most states won, or the most votes won.

No matter how it works out, the super delegates will be the Democrat kingmaker. On top of the caucus-primary distinctions and the brewing storm over Florida, the way the Democrats are choosing their presidential candidate just doesn't seem very democratic.

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